Interview with Oscar Vance Armstrong

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

OSCAR VANCE ARMSTRONG

Interviewed by: Willis Armstrong

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Q: Oscar, it is nice to have a chance to get on tape your recollections, reflections and philosophy about your long experience in dealing with particularly Far Eastern affairs on behalf of the U.S. Government. How did you happen to get into the Foreign Service in the first place?

ARMSTRONG: I guess it goes back to the fact that I was born in China of missionary parents.

Q: It makes a difference.

ARMSTRONG: It does make a difference. But I didn't go directly from that background into the Foreign Service. I had a detour after college and went into actuarial work for a couple of years. Then the war came along and I was in the Army Air Corps and ended up in a POW camp in Germany. I had a lot of spare time to think and like a lot of people decided that I didn't want to go back to what I was doing. I preferred the Foreign Service instead.

Q: What had you been doing before the war?

ARMSTRONG: Actuarial work.

Q: Actuarial work, I see. That is a good durable profession but not very interesting.

ARMSTRONG: After the war I signed up for the exams, took them and fortunately got admitted in 1946 and stayed in for a full career.

Q: Until you retired in...?

ARMSTRONG: Retired mandatorily at age 60.

Q: You got caught by that.

ARMSTRONG: I got caught by that.

Q: Yes. My wife got caught by that too. We only got her back in by '58, but she didn't last long. What was your first assignment in the Foreign Service?

ARMSTRONG: This was back in the time when we had a 3-months training program at what used to be called the Lothrop House (wasn't it?) up there on Connecticut Avenue where it splits. We were all given a chance to express our preferences. I logically enough expressed China, and I got Canton.

Q: They got it right that time. So you went to Canton in 1946?

ARMSTRONG: Went there towards the end of '46. I was assigned to what I guess all officers nowadays are assigned to—consular work. There was a huge backlog of Chinese who wanted to come to the States from that part of China which was the area from which most Chinese-Americans in the past have come. There was also a long history of fraud in that area. So there was this huge human tide waiting to sweep into the consulate and we had very few resources to cope with it. I probably let more people into the United States with a claim to citizenship who didn't have a valid claim than any other officer in the Service.

Q: Statute of Limitations will protect you now.

ARMSTRONG: Thank you. But it was an interesting period there. The area was still very much affected by the Japanese war-time occupation, of course. There was not much political activity in that area when I was there that I was aware of, even though Canton traditionally has been one of the areas of revolutionary activity.

Q: It was an area more affected by Westernization, wasn't it, than some other parts of China?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, partly because of its proximity to Hong Kong, or course. It was also the place from which Chiang Kai-shek started on his 1926 Northern March to unify the country.

So I had a year there. Only a year, for reasons that I don't know are relevant to this operation—I almost got fired from the Foreign Service then.

Q: Did you now. I assume it was not for cause.

ARMSTRONG: Well, there were about three of us who got into trouble with a senior officer. Finally the embassy sent somebody down to find out what the problem was and decided the best thing was to clean house. So I came out, smelling like a rose, assigned to Peking—to the language school in Peking.

Q: That was 1947.

ARMSTRONG: The end of 1947. I stayed at Peking just long enough to have Mao Zedong establish the People's Republic of China. We left in November of 1949. The consulate general then stayed on and was finally forced out by the Chinese who said they were going to retake some of the buildings that at one time housed the U.S. Marines and at our time housed the consulate general.

Q: That happened when?

ARMSTRONG: It was April of 1950.

Q: So you were three years in...

ARMSTRONG: Well, I left earlier having finished language school in November of '49. I spent about two years there.

Q: But you had had some childhood training in Chinese.

ARMSTRONG: I grew up speaking the language but left China, as many missionary families did, in 1927 and then because of family medical problems we stayed in this country for three years. At the age of 8 or 9 when you are trying to be an American in an American community you don't retain your Chinese very well.

Q: That was exactly my wife's experience. She was a missionary's daughter in Japan and she grew up speaking Japanese and came back at the age of 8. She lost it.

ARMSTRONG: I don't know if it is relevant to this, but you might be interested in telling her this. At a social function many, many years later, I found myself sitting next to a woman who turned out to be a clinical psychologist. Somehow we got into the usual opening conversational gambit of where are you from? I said, “Which do you want, the simple or more complex answer?” She said, “Well, give me the complicated one.” I told her about China. We talked about that and then I said, “You know, I lost a lot of my language. I went back to China, but most of the time I was in Shanghai then where there is a different dialect than I had known. Is there some way that you or others could expedite the process of relearning the language— bringing some of that memory back up to the surface— perhaps hypnotism?” She said, “Yes, probably, but not completely successfully depending on the subject. But it is risky because you don't know what other memories you are going to bring up.”

Anyway, I finished language school in Peking and was authorized to leave. The Communists took Peking, if I remember correctly, in January of '49 so we had a little less then a year there after they took over the city.

Q: What were your impressions of the initial impact of the Chinese Communists taking over at that point?

ARMSTRONG: Well, in the first place the takeover was not by military action. The communists had been moving down into the area and eventually the Chinese general commanding the armies in the area, General Fu Tso-yi, in effect defected with all of his forces. So Peking was under siege for a while but it was not shelled.

I would say from the point of view of the Chinese people there, in the first place a lot of the younger people, students, etc., had already been slipping out through the Nationalist lines joining with the communists, probably not knowing too much about communism, but they wanted a change. They didn't see a change being promised by the Nationalist regime. I have always felt that Chiang Kai-shek lost China partly because of some serious military mistakes he, himself, made...

Q: But they were basically political mistakes.

ARMSTRONG: Basically he did not have, and was unable to project a vision of a changed China. Many, many Chinese did not want the old China, the old corrupt regime. So, whether you call it political or ideological, or what, he was just unable to break away from the way he had done things in the past or the circle of people he had around him.

Going back to the Peking takeover, I think it was rather a complex mixture of relief that they were not going to be caught up in the fighting, and hope that some sort of change was going to occur. This was at a time when the communists were still talking about what they called “new democracy.” They were not implementing, whenever they got to a city, the harsher measures they adopted later. They essentially took over the administrations

and kept them doing what they were doing, etc. So, some hope for some change, but also some concern because they didn't know much about these people.

Q: The capital was not in Beijing...

ARMSTRONG: Right. At that time it was not called Beijing, it was called Peiping, which means “northern peace” rather than “northern capital”—a term which those of us who in government were involved in Chinese affairs had to continue to use for many years, because we did not recognize Peking as the capital, once the communists established it as the capital. We kept saying Peiping. I still say Peking frequently and when people ask me, “Shouldn't you say Beijing?” I say, “Yes if you feel you must say 'Pa-ree' rather than Paris.”

So, it was an interesting period. Those of us in Peking did not suffer unduly. There were some inconveniences and some humorous aspects of them. I don't know if you want that sort of anecdotal material. Elsewhere there had been serious problems. Angus Ward up in Mukden had been in prison accused of spying. He was eventually released.

Q: Those of us who knew Angus and had served with him in Moscow were sure that he had beaten those Chinese to an inch of their lives. He was a rough man.

ARMSTRONG: Was he? I was there when he came out. Our travel was obviously circumscribed. We couldn't go outside the city without getting permission. There were some other minor hardships. The communists, of course, didn't officially recognize the diplomatic status of the consulate or of the people assigned to it. One historical footnote: Howard Sollenberger was the head of the language school; he later became head of FSI here; and many years later, after the Chinese had established their liaison office here, the number two at the office, a fellow by the name of Han Xu, was interested in taking a tour of FSI. As soon as they met, Han Xu said, “It is nice to see you again.” Sol couldn't figure this out. It turned out that Han Xu had been the city government official who had come to the consulate general on October 1, 1949 to officially, although they didn't recognize

us officially, notify the consulate general that the People's Republic of China had been established and turned the document over to Sol at the gate of the consulate general. Many, many years later they re-established contact. So I left in November.

Q: That is when they closed out.

ARMSTRONG: Well, I left before they closed the consulate because I had finished the language study.

Q: You weren't assigned to the consulate per se.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, I was assigned to the consulate but we had our own...

Q: But you were doing language study.

ARMSTRONG: Doing language study essentially.

Q: Were there any unpleasantnesses when they finally did close out the consulate or was it a peaceful departure?

ARMSTRONG: Relatively peaceful. I think there was some minor harassment. There was a little bit when we left, but we managed to get all of our belongings out. Earlier the Department had authorized us, as the communists were closing in on the region, to ship out both our families and furniture. Almost everyone shipped their furniture and almost nobody shipped their families home. But we still had a good bit left—in fact acquired some more as things were so cheap. We managed to get our personal things out. There was harassment at the station because they wanted to look at everything, etc.

Q: You came out by train?

ARMSTRONG: Went down to Tientsin by train and then by coastal steamer to Hong Kong and back to the States.

Q: My only experience in China was in Shanghai in 1941. I was en route from Moscow to Washington and spent the whole summer in Japan and then we thought we could get an American ship but we went over to Shanghai. I was in Shanghai for three weeks in the autumn of '41 just before Pearl Harbor.

ARMSTRONG: So you got away just in time.

Q: Yes. Came home in an army transport. That was my only trip to China. They were technically under siege in Shanghai at that time, the Japanese army was outside, so I didn't see much outside of the city.

ARMSTRONG: The International Settlement and the French Concession were still being run essentially by the Europeans not the Japanese, but the Japanese were certainly there and had been for four years.

Q: Where did you go from Peking?

ARMSTRONG: I came back on home leave and then had a temporary assignment to Saigon. They wanted a Chinese language officer and the person who was assigned there wasn't going to arrive for some months so I had about four months in Saigon. This was back, of course, during the French involvement.

Q: Still French territory. This was a consulate.

ARMSTRONG: No. It became...I am not sure I am going to get my chronology right...we had an ambassador there, Ambassador Heath.

Q: I guess that was about when Vietnam had been set up, about 1950.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, this was 1950. That is about right. So I had about four months there.

Q: What was your impression of Saigon in those days?

ARMSTRONG: In Saigon, itself, it was not like Saigon of the late '60s and early '70s during our time there, because life went on fairly normally. There were limitations of travel. I did get up to Hanoi, but I did it by air, not by road. This was still some years away from Dien Bien Phu.

Q: Dien Bien Phu was 1954. So this was before the French power had really been broken.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, that is right. The French presence was still very strong. I was there for a sort of China watch. Watching the Chinese population, etc. There was also a large contingent of Chinese Nationalist soldiers that had retreated there and been interned there. My main contact with local officialdom was with the French civilian officer who was their man dealing with Chinese affairs.

Q: Basically an intelligence operation.

ARMSTRONG: Not intelligence in the normal sense. It was one more of trying to figure out the mood of the Chinese population and what their role was in Vietnam, etc. I wasn't there long enough to become very knowledgeable about the situation.

And from there I was assigned to Singapore where I had a pleasant, but in retrospect, somewhat dull two years. It was still a British colony and had very much the atmosphere of such. There was not much political activity in Singapore itself. Up in the Malaya, of course, you had the insurgents which didn't touch Singapore that much.

There wasn't much political activity. While I was there I remember going to a banquet commemorating the establishment of, it must have been the city council. There was a gavel that USIA had gotten from somewhere in the States and I presented it to the new head of the city council. That was the first step, but they weren't talking independence at that time.

Q: They never talked independence until they got connected with Malaya.

ARMSTRONG: Yes. I was transferred up to Malaya after a tour in Singapore.

Q: How long were you in Singapore?

ARMSTRONG: Two years, from 1950-52. Then went up to Kuala Lumpur. That, of course, was much more interesting because you were in the middle of a very interesting country and the insurgency was still going on. Not long before we got there the British High Commissioner had been ambushed on the road up to one of the hill stations and been killed. By the time we left, about two years later, they had declared the first “white area” which meant it was free of insurgency and life could return more to normal. As you know, this was one place where a communist insurgency was effectively quelled.

Q: I know. I visited KL in 1954 and again in 1956. In '54 I was put in touch with some of the British people who were handling the insurgency problem and went to a command post where I had an interview with General Templar who was a fascinating guy. I was taken around and shown their defensives, war maps, etc. by officers in the British establishment. It was very interesting. I also got out and looked at some small rubber plantations. But you were in KL until 1950....

ARMSTRONG: 1955.

Q: We were there at the same time but I didn't know you.

ARMSTRONG: No. I don't recall.

Q: I have forgotten who the consul general was.

ARMSTRONG: It might have been Eric Kocher.

Q: Yes, it was. I remember staying with him. He gave me a dinner party. He was very horrified that I was traveling around the tropics without a dinner jacket. All I had were my Washington cotton suits.

ARMSTRONG: I hope some of our military that were involved in Vietnam were briefed on the British experience in the Malaya. The situations, of course, were different.

Q: Totally different because the Chinese were the guerrillas in the woods. The Malayan population was on the side of the British.

ARMSTRONG: That's right. And there was no equivalent to North Vietnam.

Q: Right, they couldn't be infiltrated.

ARMSTRONG: Thailand was reasonably cooperative in helping the British control the border area there. So the situations were very different, though it took them many years.

Q: Did you think there was any significant connection between Peking and the insurgency in Malaya?

ARMSTRONG: There certainly was in terms of moral and propaganda support. In terms of physical assistance, money or arms, I think the evidence was that there was not very much of it.

Q: Well, it was hard to get at.

ARMSTRONG: That's right.

Q: And the British controlled the ports, railroads and roads pretty much.

ARMSTRONG: It would have been difficult for them and, of course, the communist insurgents were almost all the time in the jungle. They were not occupying any significant

urban areas in Malaya. The jungle was sometimes very close. One of our younger officers in the consulate general joined some Britishers that called themselves the Hounds and Hares. They used to go out on these paper trails. One person goes out and leaves pieces of paper and the others try to catch up with him. This time they flushed out a small guerrilla group, dashed back in town, reported it, got a reward and had a huge, what the British call a “bash” to celebrate their exploits. They were fairly close at times, but they were not at any time threatening to take over.

Q: They didn't take the bus into town.

ARMSTRONG: No.

Q: You left Kuala Lumpur in 1955, '56.

ARMSTRONG: I left in 1954, I guess. Either '54 or '55. My next assignment was Hong Kong to become part of the rather sizeable China Watching group which was one of the main functions of the consulate general there.

Q: How many people did you have in the China Watching group?

ARMSTRONG: Oh, goodness. I have a bad memory for that sort of thing. I would say probably about, leaving the Agency aside, about ten Foreign Service officers at that time. We also had, and this was what I did for a while when I first arrived, a very large press monitoring and translation unit of Chinese. And a publication procurement operation. The good entrepreneurial spirit of the Hong Kong Chinese pretty soon learned that the U.S. government was willing to pay good money for publications from the Mainland, newspapers, magazines, etc. So we had a good bit of success in getting that kind of thing.

The translation unit supplemented what FBIS was already doing, which was monitoring the radio.

Q: Go back a minute. When the consulate was shoved out of Peking in 1950, all other consulates were also removed weren't they?

ARMSTRONG: Not simultaneously.

Q: Within that time frame...

ARMSTRONG: Within that time frame there was no more official US representation. There is still controversy, incidentally, in academia and elsewhere, over whether or not there were some Chinese communist overtures that we, the US, failed to pick up and respond to. One in particular I remember but I won't go into detail here. But that debate to some extent continues.

Q: One could always, of course, point out that, if one were arguing that case, that as long as you had Walter Robertson as Assistant Secretary of State, no....

ARMSTRONG: Well, that was later, of course.

Q: This was later. When was he out?

ARMSTRONG: Leighton Stuart was then still our ambassador to China, the former head or President of Lingnan University up in Peking, a former missionary. And it was during that period that there were supposedly some of these overtures.

Q: I see, this was in an earlier stage.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, an earlier stage. Later, once the Korean War broke out, there was no possibility of obtaining a rapprochement. But, before that, my own view is that there was not a real interest in China, and at that time when they were adopting a policy of leaning to one side, as they put it—that is you can't be neutral in the cold war between the US and

the USSR, you have to take sides. It would have been extremely difficult to establish any kind of diplomatic relations.

Q: So there are a whole multitude of reasons as to why that was unlikely.

ARMSTRONG: I think it was unlikely. But you recall that we sort of shifted our position on the Chinese civil war, the US government did.

Q: After the Marshall Mission.

ARMSTRONG: After the Marshall Mission failure and after the Chiang Kai-shek withdrawal to Taiwan and so on. We initially did not come out for full support of the Nationalists in Taiwan. We said in effect that we were not going to get involved. But then, of course, June, 1950, the Korean War, and the Chinese, so-called volunteers that came in that year....

Q: Refresh my memory. When was it that McCarthy got into guys who had served in China, like....

ARMSTRONG: I was trying to... I saw Jack Service recently out on the West Coast.

Q: Oh, did you. His son joined the Foreign Service and worked for me in the State Department. A good officer.

ARMSTRONG: Oh, did he? Is he still in the Service?

Q: I don't know. That was a long time ago.

ARMSTRONG: I was trying to remember the other day and I said I would have to refresh my memory and get the dates right here, but I haven't done it. Early 50's.

Q: I was thinking the McCarthy era when it went hammer and tongs was primarily under the Eisenhower Administration.

ARMSTRONG: That's right.

Q: So it had to be 1952 on.

ARMSTRONG: I guess Eisenhower came in the '52 election. So '53 or '54.

Q: Of course, by that time, the fat was in the fire as far as the Korean War was concerned and there was no question about the US position towards Communist China.

ARMSTRONG: No, there wasn't. By that time we began to give strong support to the Nationalists on Taiwan.

Q: As well as continuing support to the Koreans.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, yes, of course. So I was in Hong Kong for about two years. I always seemed to have stayed at posts two years. The idea of double tours never quite caught up with me.

Q: It was kind of hard on your furniture.

ARMSTRONG: Yes it was.

An interesting period in China because not only the Korean War aspect, but developments within China itself. That was when they had completed their land reform program, at great human cost, and they were trying to develop their economy with a modicum of success and a good deal of Soviet assistance.

Q: This was well before the break.

ARMSTRONG: Yes. And they were doing some rather sensible things given the overall context in which they forced themselves to operate. So it was interesting to be there.

Q: Your work with that group—were you looking primarily at political matters?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, mainly political. We also had some who were looking at the economic effort.

Q: I remember the intelligence reporting that came out of Hong Kong and that area. I was involved in COCOM and trying to keep things away from the Chinese. So naturally we read what was going on and tried to evaluate what that meant in terms of what we should try to withhold. We had a special list on China which had more simple technology than in the case of Russia. People used to argue that the Russians could buy it and sell it to the Chinese. My own judgment at the time was that that was too complicated for the Russians to handle. The bureaucracy would render any major transaction impossible.

Then, after Hong Kong?

ARMSTRONG: After Hong Kong I stayed in China Watching, being assigned back to the Department to take over the China Office in INR. I was there for four years—one of the longest tours of my career.

Q: From '57 to '61.

ARMSTRONG: Again, that was a very interesting period in China. You had, I don't want to put too much into China Watching jargon, but you had what was then known as the Hundred Flowers Campaign. This was to relax the atmosphere and tolerate some criticism. It got out of hand and they immediately clamped down. You had the anti-Rightist campaign then. One of the earlier manifestations of what later became a very consistent pattern in China under the Chinese Communists, suspicion of the intellectuals.

Q: When was the so-called cultural revolution? Was that....

ARMSTRONG: That came later. That came in the mid-60s. But this earlier Hundred Flowers campaign, when Mao was surprised by the volume and vehemence of some of the dissent and decided to crack down, wasn't the first, but was the first time that they really threw the fear of Marx and Lenin into the intellectuals of China. Then you had the Great Leap Forward in '58, one of the world's craziest experiments. Then the communes as part of the Great Leap Forward.

Q: That was when they took the intellectuals out and put them in pig sties.

ARMSTRONG: That was a part of it. The main thing was when they...back tracking just a little bit. China needed land reform because you had eighty percent of the Chinese working the land who were deeply in debt to the landlords, etc. The Chinese carried it out in a very violent manner. Nobody really knows how many people were killed, but I suspect the figure is in the millions.

Q: By collectivization.

ARMSTRONG: Yes. But they did distribute the land. Then gradually they started with mutual aid teams, then cooperatives, then collectives and eventually they moved into communes by which time the peasants had lost all the land. They had no land or implements to work with, everything had been communalized. And the system didn't work. Together with the Great Leap Forward, the commune system and some bad weather, China came closer to the type of traditional famine for which China was infamous than any other time of the communist rule.

Q: That was 1950...?

ARMSTRONG: That would have been '58, '59 and the really bad year was 1960-61. The Chinese popular parlance still refers to it as the Bad Years. Nobody really knows how

serious the problem really was. One demographer later said that China should have 28 million more than they seem to have. That doesn't mean 28 million died, but there were many deaths through starvation and malnutrition. Infant morality rate was very high.

Q: Also, probably the statistical methods were questionable too.

ARMSTRONG: Sure.

Q: I remember doing the Russian census which came out about 1940. The growth rate of the population by 1940 was much less than you would have expected given the normal indices in Russia.

ARMSTRONG: Yes.

Q: We attributed that in large measure to the loss of people during the 1930 collectivization. Millions of people died there, nobody knows how many. We suspected in the embassy in 1940 in Moscow that the Russians had fiddled the figures and raised them higher than the actual count to cover up some of the losses. We had no way of proving that, however.

ARMSTRONG: The other major development during my time in INR...as a matter of fact I was down at a West Virginia State park with the family taking a vacation when it happened...was the Taiwan Straits Crisis in 1958, when it appeared that the Chinese were trying to oust the Nationalists from the islands right off the mainland's coast—Quemoy and Matsu. Quemoy, being only three or four miles off the coast, was heavily fortified. One issue for the United States was “Are they actually going to start an invasion of the islands? If not, are they going to try to interdict the islands and if so what should we do about that?”

Q: I remember. I was in the Department until April of 1958, and then I was in Ottawa. I remember that very tense time.

ARMSTRONG: There was another issue, although I never thought it was a serious issue. That is whether or not, if we got involved in some way, were the Soviets going to get involved. There were some who felt we had edged towards nuclear war. I never felt that way. Partly because the Soviets, although giving a reasonable amount of support to the Chinese, didn't come out with their real sort of vigorous support and threatening language vis-a-vis the West until it became apparent that the whole thing was going to calm down. Many years later we learned that one of the problems of the Sino-Soviet relationship was the failure of the Soviets to give China as much support as China thought it should have.

Q: The Russians don't like the Chinese very much. They are scared of them because there are more Chinese than there are Russians. And they have been scared of the yellow peril more than anybody else for years.

ARMSTRONG: You may have heard the Polish joke about the genie that appeared to a Pole with three wishes. He said, “I want the Chinese to invade Poland and then withdraw.” So they did. “Okay,” said the genie, “You get another wish, what do you want?” “I want the same thing,” he said. So it happened again. When he asked for the same thing the third time, the genie said, “Okay, but why do you want this?” He said, “Well, every time they attack us and withdraw they have to cross the Soviet Union.”

So I was in INR until 1961. Then I had a year at the National War College.

Q: What did you work on there? Did you work on China or the general course?

ARMSTRONG: The general course. At that time, and I assume it is still the case, the main advantage is that you are rubbing elbows daily and becoming friends with a wide variety of military people. It is not that I learned all that much there in terms of factual information, etc.—the War College was not where you studied military tactics. We had some decent officers there, two of my classmates became chief of naval operations, Bud Zumwalt and Jim Holloway. Several of the other officers got three stars...

Q: The military sent a lot of their best people to those schools.

ARMSTRONG: They do.

Q: Every time I meet military people who have been to one of these school...I met one the other day at the Grace Church where I taught. A guy came up and said, "I was in the Air Force and I went to the War College. I have loved the State Department people ever since. We are all in the same business." This has a real cross-cultural effect both ways.

ARMSTRONG: It does. The commandant, I have forgotten who he was then, in his initial address to the new student body made a very interesting point. He said, "I will make a prediction. At the beginning...a lot of the work was case studies, hypothetical situations, what would you do about it, etc....most of the military will opt to use military force and most of you civilians will want to hold back. By the end your positions will be reversed." He said that the military will see the situation so complex that they don't see how it can be handled by military force and the civilians will see the need to do something other than diplomacy. And to some extent that happened and it was good. That is one of the purposes of the whole operation.

Q: I think you get your payoff in what happened in the Persian Gulf in terms of understanding the civilian and military, within the Executive Branch anyway.

ARMSTRONG: And some of the friendships formed there are useful later on. You keep running into classmates in one position or another.

Q: Real bonding takes place in those schools. I have talked at all three Service schools and also the National War College when I was in the Economic Bureau. It was always a delightful experience.

ARMSTRONG: I think the State Department considers the Senior Seminar the apex, so to speak, of the in-government training program. I think it is one notch above the National War College.

Q: But in the Senior Seminar you have people from the Services too. I think this is an extraordinarily valuable program. I am interested in your comment because everybody I've known who has had the experience of being in one of those courses has found it wonderfully worthwhile, both military and civilians.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, I think so.

Q: And, of course, we always have one State Department man and there are several military men at the National Defense College in Canada.

ARMSTRONG: Yes. And I think the Imperial Defense College as well.

Q: Yes, also the Imperial Defense College. Bill Leonhart was there at one time, in London. So it is a very good system.

ARMSTRONG: So, I had an academic year there. It was a very pleasant one. I don't know if it has changed, but you don't have to work too hard. It is meant to be an “open your mind” type of experience.

Then I ended up, as you did in London. Went to London in the FE position. The political section had three or four of those regional slots. They had an European fellow, Middle East, Africa and Far East. They didn't know what to do with Latin America and the Caribbean so they threw that into the Far East.

Q: So you could become a Cuban expert.

ARMSTRONG: Not quite. I kept telling them that I needed an orientation tour to my area, particularly the Caribbean. Actually I put a good deal of time on that. One of the issues

back then was whether or not British Guiana was going to get its independence and go communist.

Q: I had the British Desk from '62-'64.

ARMSTRONG: Okay, so you are very much involved.

Q: And remember that one very well.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, indeed.

Q: I went down to Guyana in 1963 and spent some time with Cheddi Jagan and also with the guy we were paying.

ARMSTRONG: As I recall it was Jagan's wife who was....

Q: I didn't meet her, but she was an American woman from Chicago and was a real organizer and a dedicated communist. Cheddi Jagan was a wandering Indian intellectual who could see good in a variety of things. He was a nice fellow. A very bright man. I enjoyed my conversation with him. Much more than I did the guy we were supporting.

ARMSTRONG: I have forgotten his name.

Q: I have forgotten it too. My good friend Bill Carlson was then Canadian Desk officer with me in B&A. He went down there as ambassador. First as consul general and then as an ambassador. He said that all his job was was to keep that guy doing what we wanted him to do, including voting the right way in the UN. He succeeded.

ARMSTRONG: [Inaudible sentence]

Q: And quite a bit on the covert side.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, indeed. I was in touch with my Colonial Office counterparts on this sort of thing. I suspect the main activity was through CIA channels.

Q: We kept a close eye on it from the European Bureau standpoint. We really didn't give the Agency a free run.

ARMSTRONG: I was trying to think back to the Far East issue that was most active at that time. It was not China, but Laos. The whole Laos issue. The British were involved there as co- chairs of the International Control Commission.

Q: The Canadians were members of it.

ARMSTRONG: The Canadians and the Poles. That led to one communist, and one leaning that way, and us. The Canadians were a great help out there. The guys out there did far more than the Department of External Affairs wanted them to do.

The other major development while I was there that I can now recall was the Sino-Indian Border War.

Q: Oh, yes. I was on the British Desk and used to read all the telegrams about it. Turner Cameron was running the India Desk and he would come down and sit in my office as a refugee from more telegrams from Galbraith. You remember the Galbraith telegrams?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. Galbraith was interestingly enough in London at the invitation of the BBC to give some lectures, not about his diplomatic activities, but his economic theories. Thus he was in London when word came that the Chinese communists had launched an attack on the border. I was the control officer and got called down for a NIACT message for the embassy about 2:00 in the morning. It was a message to Galbraith saying, “The President thinks that perhaps you should get back to your post.” I decided there was no point in waking him at 2:00 in the morning to tell him this so I looked up the best airline possibilities and woke him up at six or seven and said, “Sir, here is a message that...

Q: He didn't give the lecture?

ARMSTRONG: No, he didn't. He did give me a text of what he was going to do.

Q: Those were the Reith(?) lectures.

ARMSTRONG: Were they?

Q: He came later when we were in London and gave the Reith lectures. I had to be host at the ambassador's house for a party for him and the guy who wrote the Kennedy books about the elections, Ted White, and some other fairly important American. We had a large collection of British people, about 50 people. The ambassador had to be away so he asked Louise and me to be host. It was a lot of fun to watch them—these three guys all with big egos. After dinner there were three clusters in the drawing room. They kept looking over to see how the competition was doing. Louise went to the Reith lectures and said the first one was good but he had material only for the first one and the rest of it he improvised.

ARMSTRONG: As I recall he gave me the text of the lectures. He looked at the telegram and said, “I guess I have no choice.” I said, “No sir.” So he gave me the text which was essentially that economists should start talking to people rather than to each other. That was his message. And, as you know, he could be very amusing.

Q: He was a fascinating guy.

ARMSTRONG: But you recall there was some interesting byplay. We and the British decided that this might be an opportunity to solve the India-Pakistan problem. A lot of effort was put into that. Didn't we send Harriman out?

Q: Sandys and Harriman went out and I can't think of two people more likely to screw a situation up. Which I think they did. Of course, the Indians didn't need any help in screwing

it up as they already had. That was the time the Paks and Indians got clustered together under Soviet auspices eventually.

ARMSTRONG: I had forgotten that.

Q: The prime ministers went to Moscow and were given a house which was totally bugged by the Russians on both sides. The Russians would give some of the information about the Paks to the Indians but not vice versa. Then the Indian prime minister died and the Russians knew he died because they had the microphones in his room, but they didn't dare tell the Indian delegation that he died because that would have admitted that they had done the bugging. That was in the press the other day.

ARMSTRONG: Did it work, the attempt to get the Paks and Indians to settle all their problems?

Q: No.

ARMSTRONG: One of the various efforts that we and others had made to solve the Kashmiri problem. I am trying to remember the name of the Colonial Office fellow for whom I had great admiration. Picard.

Q: Yes, I remember that name.

ARMSTRONG: A big husky fellow. A very good officer who was involved in the subcontinent, the Pakistan and Indian aspect of that whole thing.

So we had a very enjoyable and interesting two years. I was lucky to serve with David Bruce, one of our great ambassadors. He was a great guy. I went in to pay my final goodbye and uttered the usual platitude, “It has been a pleasure to work with you, sir.” He said, “The thing I have appreciated is that you haven't worked with me very much.” He

said, “As you know I don't like to get too involved in a lot of things and I am glad you didn't get me involved in too many things.”

Q: I have a Bruce story that I have always cherished. He used to get very worried about the extent of British financial reserves. We had to send a telegram every week from the Treasury attach# to the Treasury telling the exact status of the reserves. He called me in one time and told me how worried he was. I said, “I am sorry sir, but those figures don't mean anything because they don't tell you the picture.” “Well,” he said, “I got so upset about this that I sent a telegram. I guess I didn't show it to you.” He fished out the telegram and showed it to me. He said, “You know, after I sent this, John Leddy, who was the Assistant Secretary, called me up in the middle of the night. George Ball called me in the middle of the night.” I read the telegram and he is talking about England going down the drain. I said, “Excuse me, but there isn't any drain for them to go down. They have 60 million people and a going concern. They can go bankrupt but then they will build themselves up again because they continue living here, etc. There isn't any tube for them to go down.” “Well,” he said, “I guess I should have showed you that telegram before I sent it.”

ARMSTRONG: I think you were the one, maybe on one of your visits to London, who commented after you had taken over the B&A Desk, that you couldn't quite figure out the embassy for a while until you realized there were two embassies operating there. There was David Bruce and then there was the rest of the embassy and the two didn't necessarily coordinate all the time.

Q: Yes, that is right. I knew it before I got there so I wasn't surprised on this occasion. All the telegrams were signed Bruce but the ones that were really from him said “from Bruce” and then were signed Bruce. He was a wonderful character. We were up at Princeton when they dedicated the Bruce Chair three or four years ago. George McGhee turned up, Lord Sherfield came over from London.

After 1964 what did you do?

ARMSTRONG: I went to Hong Kong as deputy principal officer. I was there for two years. That particular position was not a China Watch position but the post was still China watching, although Hong Kong itself was becoming more and more important.

Q: Hong Kong, itself, was beginning to assert its own identity. We were getting all of that tremendous economic activity.

ARMSTRONG: That's right. Therefore, mainly on the economic side, there was a good bit of American interest. I had a lot of American companies coming in. But the China watching activity at the post continued because we didn't have any post closer to China proper. As many of the number two jobs were in many places, one of my main function was to keep wheels turning smoothly.

Q: You performed the DCM functions which is to make sure that you do everything that needs to be done that other people are not doing.

ARMSTRONG: That's right. And not inject myself unduly in what they or the consul general are doing. Again it was an interesting two years.

Q: Who was the consul general?

ARMSTRONG: Ed Rice.

Q: I knew him, sure. He and I were neighbors here.

ARMSTRONG: Ed subsequently had a Diplomatic-in-Residence job during which he started a book. He produced a carefully researched book about Communist China up to that time. Recently I heard he has just come out with a new book about...well the title is something like “Wars of A Third Kind.” I am not sure.

Anyway it was a very pleasant two years.

Q: Oh, it is a very attractive place.

ARMSTRONG: I came back to Washington to take over the public affairs job in FE. That was rather a tough period, because the Vietnam war was going then and was the main issue, of course. I think the name was changed by then to EA.

I worked under Bill Bundy who was Assistant Secretary during that period.

Q: Oh, yes, I remember that.

ARMSTRONG: He was a very bright guy with a rather short temper. The main activity I found myself in was with the press. I was constantly being contacted by journalists who were trying to get some background information or something they could use. Things were not always going well in Vietnam. The Tet Offensive occurred while I was there.

Q: Your tour was from....?

ARMSTRONG: 1966 to 1968. As did many others, I had great respect for the fellow who was our spokesman at that time, Bob McCloskey. He was in a tough position at a tough time. He did a good job.

Then I went from there to DCM in Taiwan.

Q: That was when we were officially recognizing Taiwan.

ARMSTRONG: That's right. Walter McConaughy was our ambassador. It was an interesting period, but not as interesting as it became, because I had left by the time we made our first open overture, the Kissinger trip to China. What was interesting about Taiwan, of course, was seeing the rather remarkable achievements— one of the worlds best land reform programs, etc. There was not yet political liberalization, that occurred

later and is still going on. Chiang Kai-shek at least had enough sense to let some of the well-trained and imaginative technocrats do something about the whole economic thing beginning with land reform. They did a very impressive job, with our assistance to be sure. By the time I got there most of our direct assistance had ended.

Q: They were on their own by then.

ARMSTRONG: Yes. Since then they have become an economic powerhouse. Second or third largest foreign reserves in the world. We have an enormous trade deficit with them which has become a problem. And interestingly enough in the more recent years, beginning to get an international position again, mainly because of their economic clout. They rather astutely use that sometimes to, in effect lure little countries, because sometimes they can get more out of Taiwan than they can Peking, so they establish diplomatic relations with Taiwan. There have been five of those recently.

Q: There is an opening for Albania, isn't there.

ARMSTRONG: It was interesting to see a Nationalist government that had done so poorly on the Mainland doing so well in Taiwan. Now the order of magnitude was so different that you couldn't say, “Why didn't they do it on the Mainland?” They didn't relax their political control, which they now have started, beginning with Chiang Kai-shek's son when he became president.

Q: I visited there in 1972, after the Chiefs of Mission meeting in Hong Kong. I stayed with McConaughy. You had left. I saw you on the way back, you were at CINCPAC.

ARMSTRONG: That's right.

Q: I was introduced to the president, Chiang Kai-shek's son. Had quite a nice conversation with him—some of it in Russian.

ARMSTRONG: He studied in Russia and has a Russian wife. A delightful person. She was very quiet and very much behind the scenes. He was cut from quite a different cloth than his father. He was a much more forward-looking person than his father. Not nearly as hidebound. His father was very austere, reserved. The son was quite outgoing. Before he rose to very high positions, he liked to have informal parties. He liked to drink until his health got to the point where he couldn't. He was one of the world's masters at the Chinese finger game. This is where you throw out a certain number of fingers and try to guess the total. The usual thing was that if you lost you downed a small glass of wine. He couldn't do that any more for health reasons so he had what the Chinese called a “dai biao”, which is a drinking representative. Occasionally he felt he had to lose just to give the other person some face. Then his aide would knock one off.

I had left by the time of the big political shock to them, the Kissinger and Nixon trips. I moved on to CINCPAC as political adviser under two admirals.

Q: I knew Admiral McCain in London.

ARMSTRONG: He was a gutsy guy, not an intellect but he knew how to play the political field.

Q: Nobody's fool in any respect.

ARMSTRONG: Theoretically MACV in Vietnam reported to him and he instructed MACV what to do, but he knew perfectly well that was not the way the war in Vietnam was being handled. And where some people would have a hard time finding his proper role in that situation, he did. It wasn't a very major role, but he played it well.

Q: He went from London out there, didn't he?

ARMSTRONG: I don't remember.

Q: Because I left in '67 and he must have gone quite directly to CINCPAC.

ARMSTRONG: He retired while I was there. Much to his regret, he didn't get extended and had to leave. He was replaced by Noel Gayler. A very different sort; the new type of admiral. More like Bud Zumwalt. Remember that Zumwalt came in as CNO and started shaking things up? Well Gayler is more of that type. And he had as J-5 a fellow who was even more “gung ho.” That created some problems. Occasionally one of the more junior officers would come to me and say, “Hey, look, this fellow is off on this wild idea, can you get involved and reel him in?”

We did a lot of traveling out of there which was good. I got a chance to visit a lot of areas. McCain was a workaholic and if he wasn't doing something he became very nervous. One of the things he could do was to travel, so he spent a good deal of time traveling around.

Q: Did he have his wife's sister there too?

ARMSTRONG: Yes, Rowena. There is a wonderful story. Jack is not known for a great sense of humor. The two of them were almost identical twins. Unless you got to know them well you could easily mix them up. She spent a good deal of time living with them. I think she had been divorced or something. Somebody once said to Jack, “How do you tell them apart?” Jack said, “That is their problem.”

Q: I knew that story too. They were both very nice women.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, they were.

Q: Were you able to reel in the other admiral now and then?

ARMSTRONG: Yes. He was a nice guy, just a bull in the china shop always trying to get something new done.

Q: Of course his subordinates couldn't talk back to him whereas you could.

ARMSTRONG: Yes. I learned more about how the military operated there then I did at the War College.

Q: Yes. You were in an operational command, so to speak.

ARMSTRONG: I was impressed by many of the officers. Two things impressed me. They had some excellent officers despite the fact that assignment to a unified command was not a sought after post, because you were losing your service identity.

Q: Don't you think this is changed under General Powell now? It seemed to me one of the great examples of the recent war was inter- service cooperation.

ARMSTRONG: I think it probably has changed. The other thing that impressed me was that....we at the State Department have a great deal of resources, I mean people, etc...the Pentagon has enormous resources and plenty of people and the automatic tendency is to use them. So it will throw 30 people at it.

Q: So does the CIA.

ARMSTRONG: Yeah.

Q: They throw people at it and it is good if they throw the right people.

ARMSTRONG: So it was a very pleasant two years. From my point of view two years is enough, because you are in an advisory capacity not in a chain of command position. So you keep having to find ways to work yourself in to things that are going on—they don't automatically come to you.

Q: You were there from ....?

ARMSTRONG: 1971 to '73.

Q: I stopped to see you there on my way back from Hong Kong in '72.

ARMSTRONG: Then I was asked if I would come back and head up the China Office. By that time Nixon had been to China. Incidentally, that news was a bomb shell for Jack McCain. For one thing, he loved to give slide illustrated briefings and every once in a while there would appear on the screen a map with all the communists area colored red, with tentacles going out to grab the rest of the world. And all of a sudden China couldn't be a huge red blob with tentacles menacing the rest of Asia.

Q: Those are our new friends.

ARMSTRONG: So I came back to Washington just about the time we were changing...

Q: I was in the Department then. That was in '73.

ARMSTRONG: I came back in the summer of '73. We had agreed to the establishment of Liaison Offices. David Bruce was the first.

Q: Yes, I talked to him before he went out. I also talked to him when he came back. He said he was glad to be back because there really wasn't anything to do there.

ARMSTRONG: That is true. Initially that was a period when the Chinese had achieved what they wanted—a relationship with the US, essentially for anti-Soviet reasons. They were not going to give much to the US until we went further.

Kissinger, of course, was interested in the relationship primarily for strategic reasons, not for sort of normal bilateral reasons. But he was interested in the bilateral thing to show that the relationship was healthy. At times he was pushy, trying to push the Chinese for that reason. And it didn't get very far. The bilateral relationship remained, things like trade and an issue called the old claims-assets issue, if you remember what that was. That was the

blocked Communist Chinese assets that we had blocked at the time of the Korean War, and American claims against China. Eventually there was the trade-off between the two. We would negotiate that at times and think we were very close to it, when all of a sudden they wouldn't approve the final step. I'm sure it was because the Chinese had said, “Not until you take another step toward diplomatic relations.”

Exchanges were negotiated but at a non-official level.

Q: It was an anomalous situation because we officially were doing business with both countries- -both Chinas. And both Chinas were saying you can't have a two China policy.

ARMSTRONG: And essentially we were having one, of course.

Q: Yes we were. I have forgotten how long that period was. It started in '73.

ARMSTRONG: It started actually with the Nixon visit in '72. The Kissinger secret visit was in 1971.

Q: But the Chinese ambassador came here. I was in the Department and used to have lunches with him. Bill Rogers would have him in for lunch and some of us would attend.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, that was in early '73. It lasted until President Carter took the decision to recognize Peking.

Q: The two Chinas carried over into the Carter Administration.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, if you want to call it that. We then took the final step of derecognizing the Nationalists on Taiwan; recognizing Peking as the government; establishing full diplomatic relations with them; letting our security treaty with Taiwan lapse; and withdrawing what military we had there, which wasn't very much. So it lasted up until January 1, 1979, which I believe was the official date. It was announced in December, 1978.

Q: It was really from 1972 until 1979. A long period.

ARMSTRONG: Yes it was.

Q: As Director of the China Office you were dealing with both missions.

ARMSTRONG: No, EA established a Taiwan Office, so I was the Mainland office. I think that was done so that one wouldn't have a conflict of interest, so to speak.

Q: Who did Taiwan when you were in the China Office?

ARMSTRONG: Well, let's see. I think Tom Shoesmith had it for a while. And I think Burt Levin had it for a while. I was not there. I had left by the time.....

Q: You were there until....?

ARMSTRONG: I was there until '76, I guess. Then I had a period of some months, 4 or 5 months, as one of the Deputy Assistant Secretaries in EA covering China, Korea and Japan. Art Hummel was then Assistant Secretary.

Q: He is a very fine guy.

ARMSTRONG: Yes, he was. He ended up, I believe, as the senior ranking officer in the Foreign Service when he retired. He had made Career Ambassador and had been Career Ambassador longer then any other CA then serving.

Incidentally, an interesting little historical record is being set here with respect to China. Art was born in China; then Win Lord, whose wife was Chinese; then Jim Lilley who was born in China and is ambassador now.

Q: I didn't realize he was born in China.

ARMSTRONG: Yes. And the rumor is that he wants to retire and will be replaced by Stape Roy, who was born in China. If that happens, I don't know of any other country in the world where we have had three out of the four last ambassadors born in that country. Amazing. I think it will end with Stape just because of the passage of time...

Q: The line of missionaries is running out. Your father was with the...?

ARMSTRONG: Presbyterian Church.

Q: Presbyterian Church.

ARMSTRONG: It was an interesting period. You had a closer contact with Kissinger than I had. But part of the interest was working in the context of the Kissinger tight control.

Q: My encounter with Kissinger was over a Chinese matter.

ARMSTRONG: I think you mentioned that. That was the Rolls Royce engines or something?

Q: The Spey engines plant. I think I recorded that in my own text. That was a case where he had sold the pass. He told the British that we didn't mind. Then he wanted me to be the guy who would be the goat. He wanted me to recommend that we wouldn't buy it and I wouldn't do it. So when he became Secretary I figured I wasn't going to be there very long and I wasn't. He let me stay on until Tom Enders came just because he needed somebody there.

ARMSTRONG: Did Tom come down from Canada?

Q: No, that was before he went to Canada. He had been in Cambodia as Charg#. Emma got killed there, a bicycle bomb. Tom and I had perfectly good relations. I used to say I

knew him when he was a younger officer because you didn't say you knew him when he was a junior officer because he never was a junior officer.

ARMSTRONG: Just reminiscing about him and CINCPAC. CINCPAC made a trip to Phnom Penh, this was back in Lon Nol's time, and I think it was this gung ho officer under Gayler, who got the idea that Gayler ought to have his personal representative to Lon Nol resident in Phnom Penh. Apparently Gayler got Enders not to object to it. I was not at that meeting but heard about it afterwards and that they were drafting a telegram back to the JCS. This was done with malice aforethought. I didn't do this very often, but did it this time. I said, “Hey, you know this has got important implications for the State Department as well as for the military. So would you put State on as an info addressee on your telegram?” So they did in their innocence. I heard later that State was rather amused by this, but JCS exploded and sent back a cable saying, “Never float anything like this in the front channel, always use a back channel to get it started.”

Q: I chatted recently with a man who was in CINCPAC as an army intelligence guy, a retired brigadier general, some years ago. His name is Whipple. I told him that I had been with the CIA some. We got to talking about intelligence matters. He said he had had endless jurisdictional battles with the CIA over intelligence fields which is endemic in CIA. CIA versus CIA. They spend more time arguing with each other than they do to get their job done.

ARMSTRONG: I noticed that when I was in INR and involved in the national intelligence estimates, etc.

Q: My job in the CIA was vetting the national intelligence and it was fascinating.

You were DAS for how long?

ARMSTRONG: About four or five months. And then the new team came in with the Carter Administration. The new Assistant Secretary wanted to set up his own new team. I was out

and sort of bounced around a bit until I retired. I was an inspector for a while. Took on a special study grant at FSI for a while.

Q: You finally retired when?

ARMSTRONG: You may recall that there was a lawsuit brought by some officer against the age 60 retirement regulation. Whether it was because of a court injunction or for other reasons, the Department was not forcing everybody to retire the minute they reached age 60. I decided to hold on to see what happened. So I held on for a while and retired in 1979.

Q: We got Louise back in, she was a Foreign Service officer and had to resign when she married me, just after I got fired by Henry. So she went back in the autumn of 1974. She lasted until '76 when she became 60. But at least she got back onto the annuity train. She is still working three or four months down there in CBC, the document bureau.Who was your Assistant Secretary when you were DAS?

ARMSTRONG: Art Hummel.

Q: Oh, yes. And he went to China as ambassador.

ARMSTRONG: Later. Art has had four ambassadorships, Burma, Pakistan, Ethiopia and China. I think he went to Pakistan after EA. And then to China in 1981 and was there until '85.

Q: That was after the Reagan Administration came in.

ARMSTRONG: That's right. He followed Leonard Woodcock, the head of the auto union.

Q: Who was Carter's Assistant Secretary?

ARMSTRONG: Dick Holbrooke.

Q: Wasn't Harriman in as Assistant Secretary for a while under Carter?

ARMSTRONG: No, earlier under Kennedy. Back in the early 60s.

Q: I remember he came and spoke at Columbia University when I was there at the School of International Affairs. He made a speech during the Nixon Administration in which he violently attacked the Nixon Administration for the war in Vietnam. I sat there absolutely astonished because I said to myself, "Who was the Assistant Secretary of State for Far Eastern Affairs when we got into the heaviest involvement of Vietnam? It was Harriman." I had done business with him in other contexts and you can have him.

ARMSTRONG: Well, you know, he is considered one of the grand old men of the ....

Q: I know he was a remarkable man and now his wife is a remarkable lady.

ARMSTRONG: She was originally British wasn't she?

Q: Oh yes, very British. A handsome lady. She is a member of the Board of the Atlantic Council and I see her. We were in Paris together, Louise and I and her at the Atlantic Treaty Association in November. She is a good force.

Well, I am grateful to you.

ARMSTRONG: I have thoroughly enjoyed reminiscing and it has made me think a little bit about the past.

End of interview